# DSWD’s first food bank

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The reminder not to waste food out of consideration for those hungry is very familiar among Filipinos. “Huwag sayangin ang pagkain, maraming nagugutom,” adults would remind children at mealtime that finishing one’s food has become a virtue.

The intent behind this principle is the same as the objective behind the Department of Social Welfare and Development’s (DSWD) recently launched “Walang Gutom Kitchen,” the department’s first food bank that aims to hit two birds with one stone: address involuntary hunger and help minimize food wastage.

The program, a partnership between the government and the private sector, encourages establishments like restaurants and hotels to donate their excess food to the bank; donations from private individuals are also accepted.

## Second-highest hunger rate

This initiative is very timely following the release of Social Weather Stations’ (SWS) latest national survey which found that 22.9 percent of Filipino families experienced involuntary hunger—the state of being hungry and not having anything to eat—at least once in the third quarter of 2024. This means that more than two in every 10 Filipinos have experienced hunger.

Inquirer columnist and SWS president Mahar Mangahas noted that this was the “second-highest national hunger rate” in the pollster’s history. The highest, at 30.7 percent, was in September 2020, during the COVID lockdown when there was an economic slowdown and widespread unemployment. The September hunger rate, he further noted, was the fourth consecutive quarterly jump since September 2023. “Although the rate of inflation in the cost of living has calmed recently, apparently it has not been deep enough or lasted long enough to stem the rise in the people’s hunger,” he said.

The Walang Gutom Kitchen, DSWD Secretary Rex Gatchalian said, aims to serve 700,000 food-poor families. Its first location was launched earlier this week in FB Harrison, Pasay City—located in Nasdake Building, a former Philippine offshore gaming operator center. There are plans to open food bank centers in other parts of the country.

## Food donation law

Gatchalian said the center accepts donations including raw and cooked food, and operates until the daily supplies last. He referred to an old law, Republic Act No. 9803 or the Food Donation Act, that encourages the donation of food for charitable purposes. He said the DSWD has been mandated to implement this law, which has not been properly put into practice since it was enacted in 2009.

But the government, if it is serious about cutting food wastage by rechanneling excess food to causes like food banks, must institutionalize this. The country does not have any anti-food wastage law and none of the bills filed in Congress through the years has prospered. One such measure is the proposed Zero Food Waste Act, which seeks to implement a system that will reduce food waste through recycling and redistribution. Other bills include banning supermarkets, aside from food establishments, from throwing away unsold food.

There’s a silver lining though. According to the UN Environment Programme’s 2024 Food Waste Index Report, the Philippines’ household food waste has fallen sharply from 9.33 million tons in 2021 to 2.95 million tons this year. However, while this is a massive improvement, almost 3 million tons of food wasted a year is still unconscionable when, based on a Statista report, there are an estimated 4.84 million food-poor Filipinos as of 2023.

Aside from the food bank, the DSWD has earlier launched its food stamp program that provides subsidies for low-income households or those earning below P8,000 per month to receive P3,000 worth of electronic credit monthly to buy high-nutrition food items from the department’s partner merchants.

## Solvable problem

These are all good programs that benefit the poor. There is no shortage of nongovernment initiatives to help the poor and the hungry, especially children—Rise Against Hunger and Action Against Hunger are just some of these programs.

But as the first public-private partnership, the Walang Gutom Kitchen is crucial in setting the pace and encouraging more widespread support from establishments. The department must sustain the food bank’s operations and ensure that its resources reach the intended beneficiaries. On the day of its launch, the kitchen served people who came from outside Metro Manila, highlighting the need for more accessible centers to serve the hungry.

“Basta nagugutom ka, puwede ka pumunta dito. Wala tayong pipiliin,” Gatchalian said. He also said that they accept donations of all kinds and that they work with experts to ensure that the food the center serves is safe and nutritious. “Lahat tatanggapin namin basta pagkain,” he added.

This endeavor should also resonate well especially in this season of giving. As the World Food Program stated, hunger remains one of the world’s biggest, and yet most solvable, problems. “Often, one meal at the right time can be enough to make a difference between life and death,” it said.